WINTERIZING HIBISCUS IN NORTH FLORIDA

By Robert H. McCubbin

If you have not already taken steps to winterize your hibiscus for the coming cold weather it is still not too late to do so. In areas where temperatures drop to 34 degrees or lower the plants must be well protected against the cold. If not, severe damage or loss of plants may occur.

The feeding of a hardening fertilizer such as 0-14-10 or 0-14-14 should have been begun about the first of September. This type of fertilizer has no nitrogen which is the stimulant for growth but does have a large proportion of phosphorous and potash for the purpose of stimulating blossoms and the storing of food in the plant cells. Small quantities frequently is far better than a large dose given at longer intervals. A small amount about every 2 to 3 weeks is a good application. Bear in mind that the type soil you may have fairly well determines the amount as well as the size of the bush. In a very coarse well drained soil the demand is more than in a compact fine grain soil in that the fertilizer and water will soak through a coarse soil much quicker. This type of protection should be kept up until all danger of frost and very low temperature is past.

Another type of winterizing is the banking method. By this we mean piling up in a mound around the base of the plant. This should be done to a point approximately 12 to 15 inches above the level of the ground completely around the trunk. This helps protect the roots better than any other so far. If the plant is a grafted

one then the pile should be carried up above the graft whenever possible. Dirt is the best material to use, however leaves, preferably oak, can be used with a layer of dirt put on top of the leaves to keep them there. Again, when the danger of frost or cold weather is past, remove the banking and start the regular feeding.

Another method of protecting the hibiscus plants, either in the ground or even in cans, is to apply a light covering of some type over the plants. Your editor is experimenting this season with a material that promises good results. He is using a polyethelene sheeting of the .003 thickness in the natural color. This sheeting being 14'x 100' will completely cover a large group of plants both in the ground or in cans as the case is at the present. This material is thin enough that even though spread over a large area the weight will not break or damage the top growth of the plants. The color is almost transparent which permits the sunlight to go through and give heat in the daytime even though the temperature might well be of a damaging degree outside the covering. In order to keep an almost air tight enclosure, the outside edges can be kept tight with the ground by spading mounds of dirt or bricks along the edges. If the temperature gets to about 26 or 28 degrees as it often does in northern parts of Florida, then a few 150 watt light bulbs can be put inside the covering well away from the covering. Since the covering will be almost airtight, even this small amount of heat will help to keep the temperature above the damaging point.

The polyethelene sheeting being used in